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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a major United Kingdom (UK) government initiative to use the public library service as a key component in the government's agenda for social change, examines future implications for public libraries and library workers if present trends and development continue, and makes predictions about the wider implications of information and communications technologies (ICT) and social change. The first section provides background on public libraries in the UK, government projects, and processes for effective use of technology. The second section describes the People's Network project, including: (1) key priority areas--education/learning for life, citizens' information, business and the economy, and community history/identity; (2) objectives--access to ICT equipment, training opportunities, and electronic content; (3) expected outcomes--the chance for all to benefit, new opportunities for people to learn and develop, and better informed and more economically effective communities; and (4) allocation of funding. The third section considers the People's Network program in a wider context, including three matters that are relevant to a broader consideration of the future of public libraries, i.e., other public sector projects, extending the People's Network to include museums and archives, and the government portal movement. The fourth section addresses the future, including recommendations for library service managers--be an explorer with a mission, and be a confident advocate for what you believe. (MES)

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Public Libraries in a Wired World

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Proceedings

Public Libraries in a Wired World

Chris Batt

INTRODUCTION

Public Libraries in a Wired World - some months ago it seemed a good title, when I was put on the spot and asked to choose. Now the time has come to decide on the topic I want to explore, I begin to wonder whether the title does not promise more than I or anyone could deliver. Most obviously, the world is not wired - or at least large chunks are not wired and able to take advantage of the networked opportunities that I must have thought were implicit in the phrase! Perhaps more significant in terms of what I do have to offer, it would be quite inappropriate to suggest that my knowledge and experience could or should have relevance to the world beyond my area of competence.

On that basis a better choice of title might be, '*the potential for the future development of the public library service in those parts of the United Kingdom where there is easy access to networked technology and where the service managers are committed to the wider use of information and communications technologies for the betterment of the individuals and communities within their geographic region*'. Catchy, don't you think? However such a clear statement of the boundaries of my knowledge is bound to reduce further the attractiveness of sitting through an hour of the real thing!

What I do want to do, based on my experience of ICT and social change, observed particularly in the UK, but also in other European countries, is three things. First, report on a major UK government initiative to use the public library service as a key component in the Government's agenda for social change. Second, to examine what might be the future implications for public libraries and the workers in those libraries if present trends and developments continue. And, finally to do a little crystal ball gazing about the wider implications of ICT and social change - how profound they might be - will ICT produce revelation or revolution - and what that might mean for public libraries.

BACKGROUND

For many years public libraries in the United Kingdom were a Cinderella service; used and loved by the majority of the population, but largely ignored by decision makers. Yet the public library service demonstrated long before environmental issues were discovered, that community re-cycling is an ideal way of exploiting the value of books. The public library funded through taxation, allowing everybody equal access to the world of culture, knowledge, learning and ideas.

In May 1997 a new Government was elected in the United Kingdom and this improved the status and visibility of the public library service. This new Government was elected on a manifesto of three key policy strands - Education, Education, Education. It also stated very clearly that it wished to respond to the challenge of the Information Society and use where possible Information and Communication Technologies to exploit the benefits of education for everyone.

To quote Prime Minister Blair: *'Information is the key to the modern age. The new age of information offers possibilities for the future limited only by the boundaries of our imaginations. The potential of the new electronic networks is breathtaking - the prospect of change as widespread and fundamental as the agricultural and industrial revolutions of earlier eras.'*

However, revolutions do not happen without direct action and if we wish to defend the public good, by which I mean guaranteeing maximum benefit to the whole population rather than just an

informed elite, direct action must include nationally managed policies. For example, reliance solely on market forces to drive a revolution is likely to exclude those lacking the purchasing power to buy in or those lacking the knowledge of how to exploit the new services and resources. Public intervention is therefore vital. I hope to demonstrate that a prerequisite of a ubiquitous Information Society is a population that is trained to use the new information and communication technologies and with the education to use information as the fuel to better, more fulfilled lives.

It would be wrong to suggest that the renaissance of UK public libraries was a sudden event with a change of government. The Library and Information Commission (the body mandated to oversee the strategic development of libraries and information across the country) had been working on a plan to develop ICT learning centres in public libraries for almost two years before the May 97 election. Linked with a growing recognition amongst ministers that public libraries were a vital, successful and cheap public good, the public library service looked likely to be one of the few local services to be excused the move to privatisation.

At this point it may be worth stating some statistics on the use of public libraries in the UK:

- Visiting a public library is the fifth most popular non-work activity
- UK public libraries are used regularly by around 65% of the population
- Visiting the library is five times more popular than watching a professional football match (quite understandably!)

It is the recognition of this wide use by all sectors of the population aligned with high levels of satisfaction expressed in a number of consumer studies that helped put in politicians' minds the reality that public libraries could be seen very much as being at the heart of their communities, cherished by users and non-users alike. Some libraries had already begun to explore the value of ICT and Internet access and reported citizens 'fighting to learn'.

With the arrival of a government committed to social equity and learning for life, 4300 public library services points, high community regard and a ready-made plan for their development presented a fast track to action. As we know well, liberal access to information builds a stronger democracy with the library as the engine of community development - supporting learning for life and social integration.

While I will naturally focus on the project for which I am the Government's chief adviser, I would emphasise that there are number of programmes working in parallel to provide maximum opportunity for the promotion of different aspects of information and communication technologies diffusion. For example:

- National Grid for Learning connecting all schools to the information superhighway
- University for Industry providing learning resources for re-skilling the workforce available across the Internet
- National Electronic Library for Health offering direct access to health information to all citizens, again across the Internet

My particular responsibility is for a project called the People's Network. There are now a number of elements to this project, but at its heart is a strong commitment that every citizen should have equal access to the new opportunities that information and communication technologies present. Access is the crucial word. As I have already said, it would be quite wrong to assume that a buoyant information and communication technologies market alone will guarantee services accessible to everyone. The reality is that through lack of education, opportunity or money the most vulnerable people - those doubtless with the most to gain - will fail to get the access to develop new skills. Effective use of technology therefore contains two separate, but linked processes:

- Ensuring that everyone can get access to and has the skills to use the technology that we take for granted
- The services (the knowledge) available in Cyberspace are of relevance to and designed for a

wide constituency of people.

THE PEOPLE'S NETWORK

I have referred already to the programme of development led by the Library and Information Commission that helped to position public libraries for the new agenda and it is inappropriate to spend too long repeating that programme in detail. For those interested to examine the various stages and activities, the relevant reports (New Library: The People's Network and Building the New Library Network) are both available at http://www.lic.gov.uk > and more current information on the implementation programme can be found at http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk.

It is nevertheless important to explain the framework now in place to fund, manage and implement what has become a major plank of the Government's accessibility and learning strategies.

What is my task? I have a mandate from the Government to ensure every public library in the UK is connected to the Information Superhighway by the end of 2002; to create library-based learning centres allowing public access to information and communication technologies services including a free route into Cyberspace. We expect to be installing around 30,000 terminals in the 4300 static libraries. To achieve this 'great leap forward" the Government has allocated 170 million UK pounds and defined some key priority areas for the provision of information, learning for life and community development:

- Education/learning for life - information about learning opportunities and online learning available in all libraries
- Citizens information - the voice of the people; information to support reasoned decision making
- Business and the economy - the integration of diverse information sources
- Community history and community identity - virtual resource centres; community publications

The fact that this is the very first time in the 150-year history of the UK public library service that national funding has been directed to the development of specific services is a measure of the priority that the Government places on this programme. In addition the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has made a gift of $4 million to support the provision of these ICT learning centres in libraries serving the most deprived areas of the UK.

We may summarise the objectives of the People's Network project as:

- providing universal access to information and communication technologies equipment
- access to training opportunities
- access to new, high-quality electronic content

and the expected outcomes as:

- the chance for all to benefit, regardless of educational attainment, financial resources, etc
- new opportunities for those people to learn and develop
- leading to better informed, more economically effective communities and of course, to deliver all of those outcomes as effectively as possible.

To cut to the chase, the first key question is how do we do it? Well, I was appointed in August 1999 to lead the project as Chief Network Adviser at the Library and Information Commission and given funds to appoint a team of three other staff. We would be required to advise the Government and our professional peers, acting as a two-way conduit for information, the emphasis was to be on quality rather than quantity. Thankfully, nobody has suggested that we should be responsible directly for the installation of 30 000 terminals and associated boxes and wires! All but the smallest municipalities in the UK have existing systems and procedures for purchasing and managing hardware and systems - our job would be to ensure that defined outputs and performance

standards could be developed and achieved in line with Government policy.

The 170 million pound comes from our National Lottery and therefore sits with one of the management boards set up to dispense the money - the New Opportunities Fund (NOF). Alongside advising the Department of Culture, Media and Sport and the managers of public library services, members of my team spend a considerable time supporting the work of NOF. As we shall see, the Team has developed a range of funding strategies and processes.

The allocation of the funding is in three parts and is required to be spent by the end of 2002. The parts are:

- One hundred million pounds for the installation of network hardware, PCs, and the like within library services. We have developed a model of funding levels for each of the 209 library authorities in the UK, based on the number of public PCs they can get into each of their libraries. Details of this model along with other information about the People's Network project can be found at our website (http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk)
- Twenty million pounds to train all 40000 public library workers to the competency level specified in the European Computer Driving Licence (http://www.bcs.org.uk). This will provide a basic skills set for everyone working within the public library system. It is expected that many staff will be trained to a higher standard becoming Net Navigators and Gatekeepers and that this 'one-off' training programme will be the catalyst to encourage all library services to make ICT training a regular part of their staff development programmes.
- Fifty million pounds to create new digital content. This is the most complex and potentially the most significant part of the People's Network development programme. While the UK Higher Education sector has been investing in the creation of digital content for some years, never before has such an open bidding programme been implemented where anyone with a good idea (library service, museum, archive, voluntary organisation, whatever) has had the chance to throw their cap into the ring. When the call for bids closed at the beginning of this year we had received 343 separate bids totalling 130 million pounds! They ranged from the history of shipbuilding to the understanding of science and the history of biscuits! I must stress that the only requirement for any bid's consideration was that it should in some way support learning in its widest interpretation so that community information and other resources designed to help people to lead better, more fulfilled lives were all acceptable.

It is not usual for governments to begin such programmes with only a general idea of what might come out of the other end. The only pre-requisite alongside learning content and, of course, probity, was that the content should be made available free of charge at point of use. This was an important decision since it underlined the public-good intent and (by the way) makes it much harder for libraries to charge for other services since it will require some tricky software or separate terminals to keep the charged from the free. One might argue that this was a brave and noble decision by the Government. I suspect, in reality, that once committed to the package, the implications of the content strand went unnoticed.

We quickly realised when 343 bids came back, (ranging from £50,000 to £10m) the original plan of inviting bids and then handing out the money would not be appropriate since there were many bids if not identical, certainly falling within what one might call areas of common interest. Thankfully a long lead time had been built into the plans prepared for this programme and we were able to get agreement from the New Opportunities Fund that we should try to cluster bids into consortia. This would have the twin benefits of first bringing like topics together - shipbuilding, poetry, science, fine arts, etc - to create co-ordinated frameworks that should encourage sustainability and second, wherever possible a lead organisation with experience of digitisation and project management would be found to support the many others joining the game for the first time.

As I write this (September 2000) the Team has just finished an intensive programme of training workshops around the country to bring together consortia members and brief them on what we expect them to do. We have created a set of technical standards for interoperation and quality of accessibility, both vital elements of successful delivery and these are set to become the de facto basis for content creation for the foreseeable future. Fuller details of the NOF Digitisation

programme and all the technical standards are available on the People's Network website (http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk).

The importance of this part of our project, beyond offering significant investment and development opportunities to public libraries, is the creation of a body of learning-related content and the exploration of the processes necessary to build from the ground up. In the training workshops there was considerable enthusiasm and motivation by the participants, despite the fact that for many of them it is the beginning of a great adventure, which, of course, it is for all of us. As we will see below, content creation will continue to be a major task for many projects and already the Government is planning a second programme for electronic content, this time focussed more directly at the cultural sector.

I have already made clear that our role as a team is to offer expert advice to anyone prepared to listen (government, funding bodies, our professional peers) and to do that we must be plugged in to the hopes, aspirations and concerns of the public library sector, and to the wider landscape of networking that is developing. If there is one thing of which we can be certain in the jungle of electronic networking we have chosen to explore - we are not alone!

THE PEOPLE'S NETWORK PROGRAMME IN A WIDER CONTEXT

It is just a year since I moved from being Director of Leisure Services in a local authority with its fixed points of procedure and hierarchy (however frustrating at times) to lead the People's Network project. Yet in just 12 months the landscape of developments has transformed itself repeatedly as new priorities and projects emerge and new relationships are called for. It would take an extended period to visit everything significant that has happened in the past year, but some important landmarks can be highlighted.

There are three matters that are relevant to a broader consideration of the future of public libraries since they all relate to the positioning of the wired public library within a landscape where partnership and sharing must become the norm.

1. **Other public sector projects**. A year ago there were possibly about a dozen publicly funded networking projects - National Grid for Learning, National Electronic Library for Health, University for Industry, IT for All - are obvious examples signposted from the People's Network website. There was awareness of each other, but no great urgency to work closely together either to ensure effective standards for inter-operation or simply to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort. A year later there are many more projects, some major in size, such as an online community legal service. Some are the offspring of earlier projects. A good example of such legacy developments is a series of trials by the Department of Education and Employment to wire up whole communities to see whether significant change in community well-being can be demonstrated through comprehensive access to ICT and networked resources. My team now spends a great deal of its time attending board meetings for these other projects and liaising with managers from a wide range of backgrounds to gather information and to avoid turf wars. Post offices are being promoted as ICT outlets in communities so we talk to their managers; those running tertiary education (universities and colleges) wish to increase community access to their online learning resources. We have become experts in our knowledge of what is going in within Government, we are after all good librarians, and now people come to us to find out what is going on! Oh, I nearly forgot, everyone has suddenly discovered there will be a need for lots of electronic content. I have read more reports than I care to recall that describe a need for information access that sounds very like what you and I would call a library - community information, access to magazines and newspapers - need I say more?
2. **Extending the People's Network to include museums and archives**. In April of this year my remit grew from just management of the People's Network within libraries to encompass museums and archives. This extension arrived with the creation of Resource: the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries. We are now a strategic and cross-cutting body. It is our mandate to join things up - or at least to try to! The team (now 30% bigger) is sustaining the implementation of library infrastructure and training and the digitisation

programme, but at the same time is looking at how museums and archives can move towards the digital age and what will be the implications for their traditions of service. Precisely the same questions that we face with libraries. At a simple level we can cost out how much it would cost to install hardware and network in all museums and archives and moreover define a series of roles that those institutions might fulfil if they were all to be so connected. Some museums already are doing great things, just as libraries have been doing. Some have yet to get to first base. The most significant strands of this wider remit turns out to be not the plumbing or even the content creation which we are already doing in a cross-sectoral way through the NOF digitisation programme. Rather they are the fascinating challenges for libraries, museums and archives to define in creative and sustainable ways the balance between the real and the virtual and the implications of this for future service delivery. More of that later.

3. **The government portal movement**. In one sense any moves by Government to begin to take a holistic view of the range of information services it is now offering on the Web is a natural progression reflecting the web-wide recognition that producing more effective ways into resources is essential. The portal, integrating a range of resources and allowing at least some personalisation, offers the promise of less random searching. Harvesting from the many different websites information that allow 'life episode' packages to be created helps those citizens most in need of the services.

This is nothing particularly profound or new. The fact that the UK Government has just launched such a portal (UKOnline - http://www.ukonline.gov.uk) re-inforces a trend that can be seen in many places. However, for my team and for public libraries, this move to integrate has some important messages. First of all, where possible UKOnline will go beyond the joining up of central government resources and connect in a seamless way to resources within the local government sector. If you are starting a new business and find the business entry point portal then you will want that to include both national and local resources. Ditto for many other life events - having a baby, what to do when somebody dies, and so on. Much of this information is, of course, managed directly or brokered by public library services. Already vital information agents within their communities, the public library is likely to find itself more and more becoming at once the local switching point for all community-related information and a hub within a national network of information providers.

For my team leading the strategic development of ICT within public libraries there are several other important messages. First of all, our Department of Culture, Media and Sport is committed to developing a cultural portal (Cultural Online) that will form one strand of the overall UKOnline portal. We now find ourselves becoming involved in the planning of a project that will build on the work we have already done developing the NOF Digitisation programme, but this time on a broader stage with many more actors involved.

This can give no more than a flavour of what is a complex and ever-changing landscape. What it hopefully shares is a sense of challenge and opportunity for our public library services. The chance to find ways of translating what we have done so well for decades into an exciting and much larger arena.

THE FUTURE

So, how much of what we are up to in the UK can be generalised? How far are public sector efforts to develop an Information Society-aware and informed population part of a global trend or simply a bandwagon leading up a cul de sac? In the first instance, the challenge for all of us is to try and get some grasp of where the current whirlwind of change and opportunity is and leading us. For example, will the Internet be seen in time as merely a fad for the developed nations; in the end no more or less important to the future than the hoola hoop or flared trousers? Perhaps the technologies we are now using will in just a few years turn out to be the Betamax end of the networking market and we will have to start all over again when the 'real thing' arrives?

On the other hand, if we are actually on the cusp of significant change in the ways that people interact and use information (with implications for major social change) then we are going to need

a clear view of what that might mean for our public libraries. You might well ask in a time of change why we should be any more concerned or able to predict the future than any other institutions.

There is, of course, no shortage of gurus painting rosy or dystopian pictures about the impact of mass market ICT on society - how networking will turn us all into empowered, active citizens or into couch potatoes. Clearly there is a limit to the extent that the future can be planned or predicted, especially when the nature and speed of change within ICT is itself so rapid.

However, if ICT continues to be a significant force for social change and if public libraries are also to be of continuing relevance, then somehow we must find a way of placing our institutions and their future social worth within an easily communicated forecast or vision. There are already examples where other organisations are converging on domains previously the unique territory of libraries (post offices and information providers in the private sector are obvious examples). If we lack a firm grip on future opportunities, our services will become marginalised. Put bluntly, if we cannot speak with confidence and passion about the future of our services, it is very unlikely that anyone else will do it for us.

How do we turn such words into practical action? To my mind there are two messages for every library service manager to act upon now:

1. **Be an explorer with a mission**. I have made reference already to the uncharted and changing landscape of networking. Those who watch that landscape beyond the physical and service boundaries of their library will be the ones who could deliver the most value to their communities. Seeing what others are doing or planning, forming partnerships where necessary, turning threats into opportunities are what will give strength to the skills and traditions that we hold high. Defining the worth of technology and its applications will also be an essential feature of the reconnaissance process. The synthesis of these 'observatory' activities must produce re-definitions of the relationships between space and place - the future will not be a digital version of the past. If we are facing the sort of changes brought about by the invention of movable type some 550 years ago and with impact measured in years rather than in centuries, then we are all going to be faced with some radical changes, or at least the need to think about them. In such times the future belongs to the bold (rather to the well-informed bold!). An example. There has been discussion in the UK about the future of education in a wired society. How will it be possible to give learning for life opportunities to everyone removing the barriers that the formal education system creates for the disadvantaged or those simply with not enough time to learn at the whim of others' timetables. If the move to networked-based learning packages takes off as looks likely, and if network access becomes ubiquitous - in the home, in the school, in the office and in public libraries and other community locations, then one can begin to define a model for learning that reflects the realities of the majority of people's lives. We plan for them to get access through our portals to information packaged into useful life-episode chunks. That, we believe is how the most people will gain the maximum value. Why not so for education? Not solely a local, pick and mix product, but that as a key element. Learning coming out of the community nerve endings that are the network. Barefoot tutors available in libraries to facilitate and mentor. Not maybe the complete death of the university, but perhaps a major refocusing onto outputs rather than process. The chance to learn something every day must be a basic right of every citizen.

   Quite how far and how fast such institutional change can and will take place remains to be seen. Certainly there are serious people thinking serious thoughts about such things - see for example the UK Foresight thinktank (http://www.foresight.gov.uk) that has recently produced challenging reports on the future of universities and the impact of e-commerce on everyday life.

   It is such challenging questions that will produce new paradigms and definitions of what is possible. I have currently been facilitating discussion amongst staff of Resource, who come from museum, archive and library backgrounds, about the value of real objects versus virtual objects (be they Greek pot, book or archival record). For those from a curatorial background

especially, strong emotions surface about the worth of the real. In our discussions we have had to work through those traditional 'positions' to a point where people recognise it is not an 'either/or' question. The future is not a straight choice between Cyberspace and public space; rather it is about redefining attitudes and approaches to create new experiences for users. Just as more and more we will be working in new organisational partnerships of mutual benefit, so the future will be as much about similar innovative partnerships between the physical and the virtual. Horses for courses.

2. **Be a confident advocate for what you believe.**Getting a sense of where trends are leading will be of no particular value if that sense cannot be translated into action, money and into commitment by policy makers. We have been lucky in the UK - the investment that public libraries have received for the People's Network in no small part because of the advocacy of a few very capable people. This is an important lesson for the future. Shouting loud without a case to be heard will not do. Neither will making promises that we fail to deliver. If we have not been in the past powerful advocates for the status of the public library at the centre of social policy, let us excuse ourselves by saying that the time was not right.

Not so now. What I see in the networked landscape is a chance to give real value to communities through libraries. Not throwing away our traditional values and becoming no more than good websites, but having a clear and firm belief in what we have to offer. That will mean defining niches that we can inhabit securely and then making sure we deliver quality to the maximum number of people.

Things such as accessibility before return on investment come to mind as vital parts of what we do. Lending books - something we have done for a long time but remains a high use activity and what better way to give access to the whole world of imagination than through community ownership and recycling? A sense of place within community is also very much part of what libraries might continue to do. Learning will demand not just access to technology but physical space to allow encounter. For many, school is not appropriate. Then there is the management of information in traditional and electronic formats that library services have been doing for some time. The role of community management of information is something that will continue to be vital and which we should nurture and protect. Then, of course there will be growing involvement in digital content creation bringing with it new partnerships and new funding requirements. Public libraries are ideally placed to support and contribute to these programmes of work.

The list will continue to grow I am sure, but will depend on thought, common sense and effective advocacy to produce the desire results. That is something that others will have to own.

THE END

I do not intent draw fundamental conclusions from the matters that I have discussed. Almost certainly by the time this paper enters the public domain events will have challenged some of what I have said - now is not a time for grand and final statements. Local circumstance should always influence local service. However, for all that I cannot end without urging everyone to see now as *the* moment for the public library service to gain rightful recognition as an engine for social policy and one of the most enduring and loved public good services. You must decide what will be the future of your public libraries. I intend to work as hard as is necessary to see that the noble tradition of the UK public library service is translated into a new and more powerful agent for good; becoming the heart and the brain of the Information Society.

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